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THE TREATMENT OF TIME IN THE *AENEID*

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Virgil's previous experience in poetical composition afforded him no practice in the construction and articulation of a plot in its relationship to passing time. The lyric poet is hardly called upon to treat of time at all, and Virgil in the *Eclogues*, and often in the *Georgics*, is a lyric poet. The *Eclogues* are lyrics of the idle shepherd, the lizard, the cicada, and the drowsy bee, and they belong as properly to the noontide as an ode to a skylark or to a nightingale belongs to morning or to evening. For in the lyric, so far as notions of time are present, sonnets and other forms being often quite void of time-notion, we are concerned with times and seasons, not with time in extension divided into days and diversified with actions and events in consequential succession. Lyric poetry, like landscape painting, has contact with time only at a point, as it were, being emotionally connected with morning or evening, day or night, winter or spring, or special times and seasons. This habit of feeling which prevails in the *Eclogues* survives in the *Aeneid*, where we find the moment of an action repeatedly seized upon for its emotional value, and we have lyrics of the night as before we had lyrics of the day. The epic, on the other hand, implies chronology, and, once the action has begun, every day must be accounted for; it deals with actions and events in series, sometimes in double or triple series, event being separated from event by intervals of day and night, just as the events of historical narratives are distributed over seasons and years in the histories of Thucydides and Caesar.

Therefore, in writing epic, Virgil enters another class and must qualify by another standard. Epic rules called for a bold plunge into the middle of the story, for a certain speed of progress, and for the keeping of a calendar of days. Two of these requirements are admirably met: the story begins in the seventh year after the fall of Troy, at the end almost of the hero's wanderings, and on the eve of

his most captivating adventure; as for speed, three books of the twelve are complete with the end of the second day, the pace does not lag in the fourth, though it is relaxed in the fifth, and from the sixth to the end events follow one another as fast as the most critical reader could desire. We have in all something over twenty days of action and more than a year of total duration, which in the treatment is made to seem even less. How carefully Virgil was attending to the treatment of time is best proven by the eighth, the ninth, and the beginning of the tenth books, where events happening in two places, at the camp and with Aeneas, are perfectly synchronized day by day and night by night. The calendar of days, that affectation of primitive or childish realism which we find in its perfection in *Robinson Crusoe*, who cut a notch in a post every morning, and in Homer, who by the mention of both sunrise and sunset cuts two notches, seems to have commended itself less to Virgil. At any rate, he keeps no calendar in the third book and, after the second day, a poor one in the fourth; elsewhere he is more watchful, but nowhere, merely for the sake of concluding the action of the day, does he chronicle the sunset, a feature of his technique that was pointed out fifteen centuries ago, if not before.

The treatment of time in the fourth book calls for special consideration. The beginnings of two days are recorded at the first of the book; this is epic time and epic timekeeping. After these two days we lose count, because, although the mine is laid, it is not yet ready to be set off. An interval must intervene for events to take on a dramatic character again, and such intervals are ignored by the dramatist. Like all arts, the drama does some violence to nature; the ancient dramatist gave a semblance of probability to the improbable by concentrating events into the space of a day; Shakespeare simply contemns both time and space. The thing that really matters is whether the action is consequential or not, and events that follow others as results and precede others as causes may be separated by intervals of months and years, let alone days. To this elimination of time we readily consent if only meanwhile the curtain is lowered or some diversion is furnished to the mind. In the Dido episode, the description of Fama and her activity serve this purpose; the course of the action is then resumed, like a stream that re-emerges from underground, and pauses no more until the end.

Yet Virgil made trouble for himself. Two species of composition, one in which a calendar must be kept and another in which it cannot be kept, are not easily joined together. This is doubtless one of the reasons why we are not prepared to consent when told at the beginning of the fifth book that a year has elapsed since the death of Anchises and, presumably, since the arrival in Carthage. Tragic tension of interest, compression of action, and elimination of time stand out in almost too striking opposition to the continuous forward movement of the epic, its extension in time, and the count of days. This is far more convincing evidence of the lack of the last hand in the *Aeneid* than any petty inconsistency that might have been cured by the alteration of a line.

This brings me to the second of two claims that I wish to substantiate: that, while Virgil attains both speed of progress and condensation of time in their respective fields, he sometimes omits to make us feel the duration of time when the action slackens, a literary necessity no less than the former and perhaps more difficult to accomplish. I am not so irreverent as to say that he could not do it; for I shall show how he has done it by more than one recognized expedient; I simply say that he omitted to do it in a number of instances that shall be pointed out along with the others.

The phenomenon to be discussed is found in the narratives of journeys by land and sea, of which the following occur in the *Aeneid*:

1. The voyages from station to station of book iii;
2. The journey of Aeneas and Achates from the landing-place in Africa to Carthage, i. 305 ff;
3. The voyage from Carthage to Sicily, iv. 571-83 and v. 1-34;
4. From Segesta to Cumae, v. 772-78, 827-71, vi. 1-5;
5. The trip up the Tiber, viii. 86-101;
6. From Pallanteum to join the Etruscan army, viii. 585-607;
7. The return to camp in the tenth, 215-75.

So far from all of these being faulty, one of them, the trip up the Tiber, is conceded by all to be among the most superb descriptions in the whole work. It was a slow passage accomplished at unusual hours between midnight and midday; the description retards the narrative to precisely the proper degree, and the arrival, when the fiery sun had mounted half the circumference of the sky, is equally

timely and picturesque. We are led by the illusion of the language to travel with the travelers, to feel the passage of time, and to arrive with them, not before them. The same device of description by the way is employed to engage our attention in the voyage from Delos to Crete in the third book, but less successfully. The Aegean was not familiar to the poet as the Italian rivers were.

A different expedient, narration of incident or adventure happening by the way, serves to occupy the intervals of other journeys. The Palinurus incident is ample for the voyage between Segesta and Cumae; the encounter with Venus for the journey from the landing-place in Africa to Carthage, and the visitation of Aeneas by the sea nymphs fills the interval of the return to camp in the tenth, though perhaps not quite adequately, and the mention of the same sunrise in two connections is not a happy arrangement.

Now we come to our animadversions. The description of the journey from the city of Evander to the river Caere in the eighth book begins well, then ends abruptly with the onomatopoetic line, of grammar fame,

quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum,

and suddenly, before our minds are prepared, the destination is reached. A different demerit marks the arrival in Sicily at the beginning of the fifth.

Haec ubi dicta, petunt portus, et vela secundi
intendunt Zephyri; fertur cita gurgite classis,
et *tandem* laeti notae advertuntur arenae.

Why say "at last"? The passage, from all we can gather, consumed only a day; the winds wilfully and swiftly bore the travelers to the shore. Still more, why should we be told a few lines farther on that Acestes comforted the "weary" men with friendly store? Since we are not informed of hardships suffered by sea nor that they sailed without provisions, and since the Carthaginian entertainment seems to have pleased them well enough, we can hardly see why they should be weary or hungry, and we can only assume that in Virgil's own mind the passage was not made in so short a time as the narrative would lead us to infer. Perhaps we have here a slight defect arising from the practice of working at the books separately and not in the

order of events. At any rate, there is a defect in the epic calendar, and it occurs at the transition from one book to the other.

I come now, not without hesitation, to the third book. I hesitate because someone may cry out, as did a reviewer of mine in another connection, "This, of course, is no novelty." It is beyond doubt very hard to say anything new about Virgil, and as hard to say a dull thing that has not been said before as to remark upon a bright point that has not been noted before; but criticism is, after all, a sort of game, and would anyone propose to abolish checkers or chess on the ground that all the games had been played, or cards because the tricks had all been discovered? Our best hope, therefore, in attacking the third book is that, if we do not bring out anything originally true, we may at least make an original blunder. It will, of course, be no novelty to say that Virgil's invention here appears at its worst. Not only is it impossible from the evidence of the narrative so to apportion the intervals of time to the brief sojourns here and there as will, with the short duration of the voyages, make a total of seven years, but a perusal of the book leaves a feeling of nervous haste and hurry rather than a vague sense of length and weariness. No special hardships of the sea are dwelt upon; the winds are usually favorable, and even the three days' storm, encountered after leaving Crete, carries them in the direction of their destination. It might be said, and probably has been said, that a navigator of his own choice would have pursued almost the same route. A ship in Cicero's time would easily have accomplished the distance from the Troad to Sicily in six or seven weeks, and it is hard to see where and how Aeneas consumed seven years with his quick voyages and interrupted settlements.

We have, then, mingled with the feeling of frustration and postponement, a sense of haste and hurry. The causes of postponement, being of the nature of misunderstood directions, lack the bulk and body to retard the narrative to an extent adequate for the space of time presumed. The adventure with the Harpies and the visit with Helenus cause only a trifling delay, although the actual number of lines devoted to these incidents is great enough. Nor is the case helped by minor aids. Virgil has actually chosen, or happened, to employ a kind of technique—what paper on Virgil is complete nowadays without speaking of technique at least once?—that hurries the

narrative. This consists in describing the departure of the ships from one station and then describing the destination and arrival instead of the voyage. This may give our imagination of time and space such a jolt as when, in a moving-picture show, a new film is shot across the canvas. For example, the departure from the Troad,

feror exul in altum
cum sociis gnatoque penatibus et magnis dis,

then the destination,

Terra procul castis colitur Mavortia campis
(Thracæ arant) acri quondam regnata Lycurgo,
hospitium anticum Troiæ sociique penates,
dum fortuna fuit. *feror huc*, et litore curvo
moenia prima loco fatis ingressus iniquis, etc.

This scheme, repeatedly employed by Virgil, leaves the voyage itself all undescribed and space for adventure or incident unfilled, but even if he had elaborated the perils of the sea and the labor of the oar, or had Aeneas beguiled the time occasionally by a harangue to his companions, to whom he is, as compared with Ulysses, strangely silent, yet the gain to the story had been small.

What the third book needs, if the sense of teasing frustration and vexatious postponement is to be changed to one of large intervals and tedious delays, is some larger and more fascinating invention. Shipwreck, it must be observed at once, is excluded by the exigencies of the story; Aeneas can spare few of his followers, and what were a shipwreck without the loss of his comrades? Romantic adventures, to which an abundant original material and poetical precedent alike invited him, were equally impossible. So far as this resource is concerned, Virgil tied his hands once and for all when he decided that Aeneas should recite his adventures to the queen of Carthage. Besides, the outstanding beauty and excellence of the Dido episode would have made the introduction of any minor erotic interest a perilous experiment. Yet, if the hero had rehearsed his story for Acestes instead of Dido we may imagine how the narrative might have been profoundly different. But even excluding shipwreck and romantic adventures as impossible or already overdone by others, we can think of other inventions. Suppose, for example, that the wild Thracians under their perfidious king had made off with the jar in which the

penates were bestowed and had led Aeneas on a five- or six-year campaign of war and discovery into the Cimmerian land to bring back tales as strange as those of Hercules, or better still, perhaps, let us imagine that some wily Phoenician had bribed the old nurse or the paedagogus to kidnap the little Ascanius and carry him off to Tyre or Sidon. Aeneas would have started out in pursuit and might well have whiled away a few years in heroic fashion, sacking now and then an impious town. A sail up the Nile would have made fine copy in Virgil's day, and besides, there was plenty of plunder always to be had in Egypt. He might even have scratched his name on the leg of the colossus, that is, if he could write. But Virgil always despised geography and had no imagination for concrete things that he had not seen. There is no use sighing over what might have been. He would have been less of Virgil had he been more like other poets.

Adding a last word by way of summary, we say that Virgil succeeds eminently well in maintaining an epic speed and in securing dramatic condensation, but the combination is not quite harmonious; that he is familiar with the stock devices for filling in the interval of a journey, such as description and incident by the way, but he sometimes omits to dwell upon the journey even by so little as a couple of lines, a method not without its consequences; that he has a trick of describing the departure and then the destination, which gives the imagination, at times, an unpleasant jolt; lastly that these defects are most noticeable in the third book, where the lack of any large incident made illusions of language unusually necessary. Finally, let me remind you that I have not said that Virgil could not do it, merely that he did not.